“THE ALBANIANS SAVED OUR LIVES”

Felicita Jakoel

**Interview with Ms. Felicita Jakoel,
President of the Albania-Israel Association,
conducted by former Albanian Ambassador Mr. Mal Berisha**

The full interview, with audio and video, is available on the YouTube platform.

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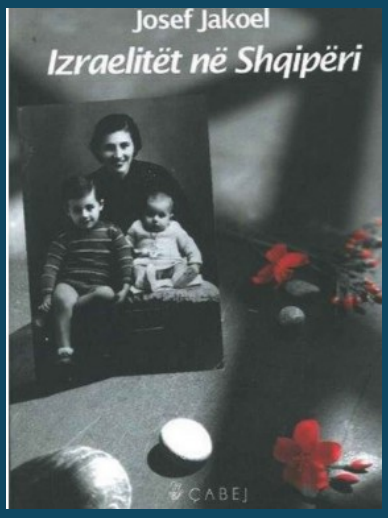
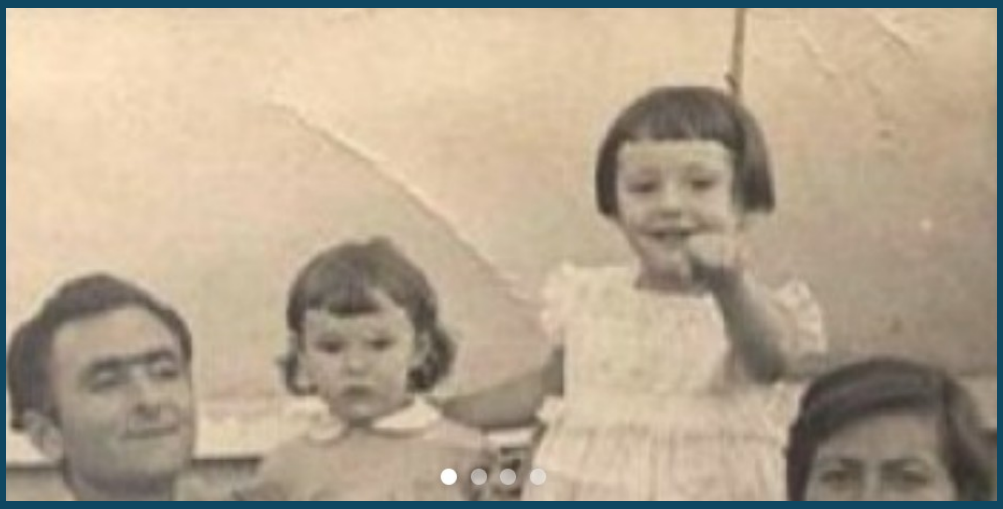
Question – Mal Berisha:
We are here with Ms. Felicita Jakoel, the granddaughter of one of the most distinguished Jews who lived in Albania, and also the daughter of another Jew who carefully documented all records of Jewish presence in our country. And, fortunately for us, she is a woman born in Albania during the communist regime, today an Israeli citizen and also Albanian, who stands as a witness to one of the finest national virtues of the Albanian people: the complete

absence of antisemitism.
What can we say about these matters?



Answer – Felicita Jakoel:
On my father's side, my grandparents settled in Albania at the end of the nineteenth century. My father refers to this Jewish community as the third wave of Jewish presence in Albania. The first wave dates back two thousand years, and one of the most important discoveries confirming this is the synagogue in Saranda, which bears witness to a large and well-established community, as evidenced by the size and significance of that synagogue.
The second wave belongs to the Middle Ages, when Jews persecuted by the Spanish Inquisition arrived in Albania. They too settled in Vlora, and according to archival records, in the sixteenth century half of Vlora's population was Jewish. After roughly a hundred years, this community also disappeared or returned to Greece.
Most of them left, while another part moved to live in Berat and Elbasan. Later on, these two communities also either relocated or converted. Those in Berat became Muslims, while those in Elbasan became Christians. For about a hundred years, that is, from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, we have no records of a Jewish presence in Albania.

The third wave, as my father calls it in his book *The Israelites in Albania*, belongs to the end of the nineteenth century, when Jews arrived from Ioannina and from northern Macedonia.
Why did they come to Vlora? I believe there were two reasons. First, the entire area was a sanjak under the Ottoman Empire, and they had the right to move freely.



Second, they came to Vlora because Vlora was a port, which gave them the opportunity to develop their commercial activities. Another reason was the fact that there had previously been Jews in Vlora. And indeed, they found the old Jewish cemetery and the old synagogue of Vlora.
So this community that settled in Vlora was very small. We are talking about around two hundred individuals, not families. What mattered most, however, was that these Jews had excellent relations with the local population. I think these exceptionally good relations can be illustrated with an example.
During the reign of King Zog, Jews owned shops in the main market square of Vlora. As is well known, Sunday is the general day of rest, whereas for Jews the day of rest is Saturday. For this reason, they closed their shops on Saturdays, which led to complaints. It was said that the Jews were closing their shops and that this was spoiling the appearance of the Vlora bazaar.

What did the municipal authorities of Vlora do? They began imposing fines on the Jews, demanding that they open their shops on Saturdays and observe Sunday as their day of rest. And what did the Jews do? They took the matter to court, and remarkably, during the reign of King Zog, they won the case. Why? Because, according to the Constitution, every individual had the right to practice the precepts of their own faith.

And indeed, my father writes in his book about the period of King Zog: 'The golden age of the Jewish community in Albania.'

They enjoyed all civil rights: the right to move freely, the right to practice their professions, and—what was particularly important for the Jewish community—the right to remain in contact with their mother communities, namely those of Ioannina, Preveza, and Corfu.
As you know, for Jews the preservation of identity was and remains of vital importance. So how is identity preserved?
Also through marriage. As a result, this was a period in which Jews genuinely felt at ease in Albania. These remarkable relations were later demonstrated in an extraordinary manner during the Second World War, particularly during the Nazi occupation.

Question – Mal Berisha:
Remaining with the Nazi occupation: your family has a very meaningful history, because at a time when the Nazis were rounding up Jews across Europe, the tragic fate that awaited them in many countries is well known. It is also well known what happened to the Jews of Thessaloniki, who constituted a large majority of the population there and of whom, by the end of the war, very few survivors were found.
Albania, as a small country, was occupied by the Germans after the Italian occupation. Naturally, the first thing the Germans did was to persecute the Jews. There is a story connected with Xhafer Deva and your grandfather, who was summoned by the then Minister of the Interior of Albania, Xhafer Deva. Could you explain it?

Answer: Felicita Jakoel
Yes, let me explain how it happened. One day during the German occupation, pamphlets were posted on the walls of the city of Vlora. Written on these pamphlets were the following messages:
“Until when? Until when will the Jews continue to be free?”
“This evil seed, which is being uprooted throughout the world, how long will it continue to have rights here?”
Mateo Matathia and Pepe Levi, who were part of the elite of the community, left their shops to return home and, as we say in Albanian, walked with their heads lowered, deeply distressed. As they passed near the town hall—at the prefecture, pardon me—they saw that the municipal council was in session there. The prefect said, “Bring them here,” and they were called out loudly. As they were going upstairs and entering the office, they heard one of the members of the council say to the prefect:
“What is happening is intolerable and unforgivable. We cannot treat our Jewish brothers in this way. For us,” he said—and they

heard him clearly—“it would be as if our own sisters and wives had been violated.”
That was all they heard. They then went inside, and the prefect tried to calm them. He said: “We will be here to protect you; however, with the Germans one never knows. Therefore, I advise you to go to Tirana and meet with a representative of the government.”
Thus, my grandfather Rafael Jakoel and his brother-in-law, Mateo Matathia, went to Tirana. There they had a friend named Bexhet Shpati, who was the head of the Muslim Community of Albania. They explained the problem to him, and he said:
“First of all, you will not go to a hotel, because it is very dangerous. You will stay here, in my house.”
The next day, he went to meet Mehdi Frashëri and, through him, a meeting was arranged with Xhafer Deva.
Every time I think about that meeting and, based on the descriptions my father has given me, it feels as though I am watching a film. Two Jews going to the Ministry of the Interior, while German soldiers are entering and coming down the staircases. It is well known that Albania had a collaborationist government.
They went upstairs, entered Xhafer Deva’s office, and were deeply anxious. Why? Because Xhafer Deva had studied in Germany and was known as a man steeped in German culture. They were unsure how he would treat them.
He asked them to sit down, reassured them, then opened a drawer, took out a list, and said to them:
“Look at this!”
“This is the list of the Jews of Albania that the Germans have demanded from us. As long as we are here,” he told them, “you have no reason to worry. But if anything should happen to us, you must then look after your own safety.”
And so they returned to Vlorë. The younger members of the family realized that they could no longer rely solely on Xhafer

Deva’s words; something had to be done. At that point, my father and his sister—who was seventeen years old at the time, while he himself was twenty—went to Tirana.

The other children, who were three in number, were taken into the home of Gjyheri, of the Gjyheri family, where there were also five or six Jewish children who remained in that household until the end of the war. My father, together with his sister, went to Tirana. They were five first cousins, all of whom rented an apartment in the Pazari i Ri neighborhood. The house still exists today.
And, as my father recounts: “One day I return,” he says, “and when I look down from the balcony of the house, I see a German and a collaborator, who was pointing up at the balcony.” In other words, he was saying: “Look, there are five Jews up there.”
My father rushed upstairs and told all his cousins: “They’ve spotted us—we must scatter.” The other three began to laugh at him. “There you go again,” they said, “you’re always afraid, you always exaggerate.”
“Fine,” he replied. “I will take my sister and leave. You do whatever you want.”
And indeed, Josef, my father, took his sister and went to Kavajë, to the Myrto family.
It was the Myrto family, the Myrtos. Kristini had been in the same class. She met him on the street and told him that they were looking for us. He immediately said, without hesitation, “Come to my house.” And he stayed there until the end of the war.
Now, what happened to the three who had remained in the apartment? The Germans came and arrested them. The news reached Vlora: three of our boys had been arrested. Panic ensued. What were we to do? Where could we go? To whom could we turn for help?
Once again, my grandfather and Mateo Matathia decided to go to Ekrem bey Vlora. You are familiar with the figure of Ekrem bey Vlora. They went to his home.

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Ekrem bey Vlora said to him, “What do you have there?” He took his hand out of his pocket and showed him gold coins. And he said, “You should know,” he said, “that even in wartime one knows how to make money.” “Is that all?” was the unspoken implication — meaning that payment was required. And if payment was made, then something could be done.

And of course, the two of them said: “Whatever you ask, as long as the children are saved.” In short, the required money was sent, and finally word came back: “Where do you want them?” And the three young men were released.

Now you might say to me: well then, was it the Albanians who acted rightly, or was it Ekrem bey Vlora? Yes, but they paid. It is true that a payment was made, but I can give you a very well-known example.

When the Jews of Rome were faced with the German occupation of the city, they were confronted with a demand: to collect gold. I do not want to be mistaken about the exact weight; I believe it was fifty tons, but I am not certain. I am not sure about the number. There is even a famous movie about this event. The entire community came together: everyone who had earrings, rings, or jewelry brought them, everything was weighed, and they reached the amount the Germans demanded. The gold was taken, and two weeks later all the Jews of Rome were deported to Auschwitz.

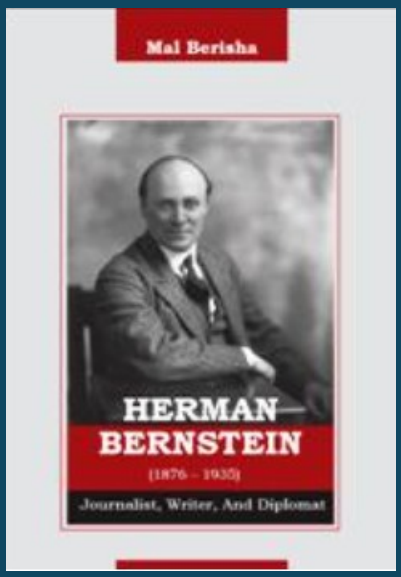
And this was the Albanian difference. In this case, it is true that a price was paid, but the children were saved. And this is only one

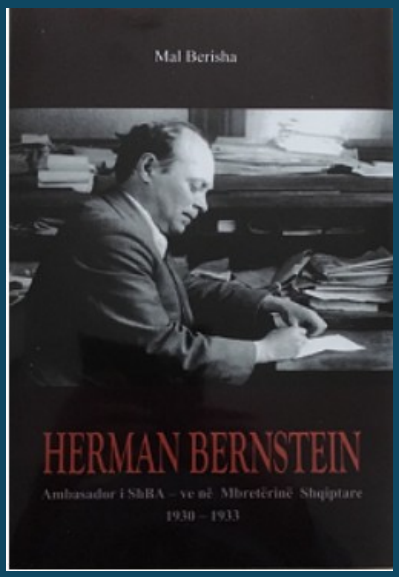
example among hundreds of others that could be mentioned. I believe that each example is more moving than the last.

Question: Mal Berisha:
In fact, it must be said that there is no one whose eyes would not fill with tears when reflecting not only on the great fortune that people of your faith were saved here, but also on the fact that the very essence of being Albanian demonstrated such a high degree of nobility. As you yourself describe it, this nobility has been internationally recognized with the title "The Righteous Among the Nations." Today, we have seventy-three such names.

Answer: Felicita Jakoel:
Now there are seventy-five, including those who provided assistance.

Question: Mal Berisha
I would now like to ask you a question related to the documentary film we are producing about a very distinguished figure of Jewish origin who served in Albania between 1930 and 1933, Herman Bernstein.





I do not know how familiar your forebears may have been with this figure, but I have studied him with great curiosity and passion.
He played an extraordinary role in King Zog's decision to instruct Albanian consulates to issue visas to Jews who felt threatened. They could use Albania as a safe haven, or as a stepping stone from which they might proceed to other countries, even if only for a limited period of time.
This led to a significant increase in the number of Jews in Albania and, after the war, enabled many of them to find their own path. Some of them, as you know, settled here. What can you tell us about this?

Answer: Felicita Jakoel:
To tell the truth, I first learned about Herman Bernstein through your book. From what one can understand, he was an extraordinarily admirable figure who most certainly had a significant influence on King Zog in the steps he took, while he was in power, to facilitate the entry of persecuted Jews into Albania.
One of the most telling examples in this regard, in my view, is the doctors who came to Albania during that period.

For example, Dr. Lehmann, who became the founder of the internal medicine ward at the Tirana Hospital. Even today, this ward bears his name. Thus, many Jewish doctors and intellectuals came to Albania at that time.
Likewise, the agreements that King Zog was putting in place to facilitate—or to make it possible for—thousands of Jews to come to Albania, to use the country as a transit point, even if only to live here temporarily, constituted a kind of transitional stage in their later lives, toward Palestine or Israel.
Unfortunately, Zog left Albania in 1939. Nevertheless, his influence as king left very positive marks on Albanian intellectuals and on Albanian political life. The fact is that even the government that came to power three or four years later—the government of Mehdi Frashëri—although a collaborationist government, adopted toward the Jews a stance entirely different from that of most collaborationist governments in Europe at that time.

Question: Mal Berisha:
You yourself lived your youth in Albania and experienced—or heard at close range—the decisions of the Albanian communist dictatorial government to turn Albania into an atheist state. When we speak of an atheist state, we mean the prohibition of every form of religious practice: for Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Muslims, and Bektashis alike.
Naturally, the Jewish community was no exception, including in religious terms. They too did not feel safe, just like the Catholic priests of Shkodra, the Muslim clerics, or the Orthodox clergy. You personally, beyond religious differences, did you ever feel a form of persecution during the years of the dictatorship, simply because you were Jewish?

Answer: Felicita Jakoel:
No, not as Jews. We did not experience antisemitism or any form

of specific persecution. We lived in the same way as all other Albanians. I remember very clearly the period when Albania moved from being a country where religion was practiced freely to becoming an atheist state. I remember that period vividly. Before that, we celebrated our holidays, such as Passover. In fact, my sweetest childhood memories are connected precisely with those family gatherings held to commemorate events that I would not describe as merely religious, because for the Jewish people they are tied to a very ancient history. They are more than religious rites.
Then I remember that everything was banned and all practices began to take place secretly. But we, as Jews, were never persecuted in any specific way. There was always something that I would not call antisemitism. It was more an inner feeling—the moment when you realize that you are somehow different.
From the very moment you mention your name, the question immediately arises: Where does this name come from? What is its origin? Of course, there were also instances when, for religious reasons, misunderstandings occurred. I remember once a girl said to me, “But you killed Christ.” I was very young at the time, about ten years old, and it made a deep impression on me. I went straight to my father, because he was my primary source—my living encyclopedia. He explained the entire history to me, exactly as it truly was, placing it within its proper historical context.

And I can say that this man, through everything he told me about the history of the Jewish people, about their values and virtues, made me feel proud to be Jewish— a very small minority, living among a population that was somewhat different from me.

Question: Mal Berisha:
Years have passed. The entire Jewish community of Albania has moved toward its homeland, toward the Promised and Holy Land. Today you come and go freely to Albania. You have friends,

companions, and loved ones here, but at the same time you are also a very well-known figure, not only as an artist in Albania, but now also as the director of the Association of Friendship between Israel and Albania.
How do you feel? Do you feel somewhat divided? Do you feel Albanian and Jewish, or only Jewish? What is this beautiful blend of identities?

Answer: Felicita Jakoel:
This is a question everyone asks me. First and foremost, I feel Albanian living in Israel. A Jew who is Albanian, of both Albanian and Jewish origin. So I have a dual identity, but I feel that this enriches a person. I have no problem at all with this duality.
On the contrary, I come from a country that saved so many Jewish lives, and for that I am proud. I am proud to be Jewish, but I am even more proud to be Albanian. This is a happy duality.

Mal Berisha:
Just as your name itself reflects.

Felicita Jakoel:
Thank you very much.

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